

SERMON for the 10th SUNDAY after PENTECOST
 August 21, 2011
 Matthew 16:13-20

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!” When Peter – Simon Peter—made his impulsive, passionate, confession about Jesus, he laid the bed-rock foundation for every statement of Christian faith from that time forward. He was Peter the Rock. That is what Jesus called him and ordained him the leader of the Church of the Apostles.

Peter’s testimony was prompted by two probing, searching, questions, questions that, twined together, have formed a strand running all the way through the tapestry of the church’s history. Jesus asked his friends:

“Who do they say that I am?” and,
 “Who do you say that I am?”

The Trinity Church men’s study group meets each Tuesday morning at 8:00. We are studying the history of the early church, and John McKinney is the leader. We are discovering that, from the very beginning, Christians were trying in different ways to answer the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” That intense discussion and argument among the earliest Christians began the centuries-long dialog that we call “Christian theology.” I suspect that in those men’s group discussions, as we try to unravel the ancient arguments and declarations, each of us in one way or another is driven to ask himself the original question: Who do I think this Christ is? That’s what ought to happen. That’s what ought to happen with all of us. It is the searching question that every thinking Christian must eventually answer for himself or herself.

Let’s imagine, then, the scene with Jesus and his followers:

They have just come into the region of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was a place of remarkable natural beauty. It is the source of one of the largest of the natural springs that feed the Jordan River. There are caves and grottos that lend it an air of mystery. It is one of those places around the world where beauty and mystery combine to convince who wanders there that this is a holy place. By the time that Jesus and his companions got there, and from before recorded time, it had been a place for worship of the ancient nature deities. (*Josephus*)

The place was also well beyond the Jewish homeland. There were no synagogues, none of the paraphernalia of Jewish religion, none of the restraints and

restrictions of Jewish culture. It was a kind of retreat for Jesus and those of his friends who were willing to venture that far. It was just the kind of time and place that Jesus would choose to teach a lesson, something new and different. They could also talk in a certain amount of confidence. They were “out of town” so to speak. Jesus was no longer the itinerant rabbi. He was something else entirely.

Jesus asked a question: “Who do they say that I am?” -- a surprising question in a way. Jesus hadn’t paid much attention to public opinion, so there might have been some stirring and shuffling around, some murmuring among the group and some chatter between individuals. A few answers were volunteered: “John the Baptist,” “Elijah,” one of the prophets; and there was probably more response along those lines once the conversation loosened up, nods of agreement or disagreement. That’s the way class discussions tend to go. But having got them involved with one question, Jesus hit them with another -- the question that would bring them up short, the real zinger: “All right, then; but who do you say that I am?”

. . . Silenceshuffling of sandals . . . a fidget here . . . a discreet throat-clearing there. ...

Until Peter broke the silence like a clap of thunder: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” He got the point! Maybe others did, too; but it was the Big Fisherman that blurted it out.

Here is one of those cases where the real lesson is as much or more in the questions that were asked as in the answers that were given. The questions are critically important, because in asking them, Jesus challenges his followers to make a sharp distinction: That is to understand clearly the difference between the opinions of others and the evidence of personal experience -- between lessons learned and truth that unfolds in the inmost being -- between “They say,” and “I say.”

To report what “they” say, is easy. There is little risk of exposure in that. There is no obligation to surrender the privacy of someone’s own beliefs and doubts, or reveal one’s own emotions. “They say,” is a convenient refuge from all of that. “I say,” takes courage. It takes the confidence and the integrity to declare the truth from the center of one’s being, without regard to personal consequences, agreement or disagreement. That is exactly what Peter demonstrated; and it is why his testimony is basic to both the Christian faith and the Christian character.

I don't discount the importance of Jesus' opening question. "Who do they say that I am?" It may have been in Jesus mind, and maybe not; but as the purpose of his Church unfolded what "others have said" becomes the heart of the enterprise. Most of us are here because of what we have heard from others, what we have been taught, what we have inherited from our families and our culture. It is the rock from which we are hewn. We have absorbed the message so that we can tell it to others, together with the faith to share it with courage and clarity.

The point is to move beyond the lessons learned, the testimonies witnessed. Creeds, confessions, theologies – sermons -- are words. If they have any value or purpose at all, it is because in the mysterious working of God they bring us, not to a knowledge of God, not to an understanding of Christ, but to the face-to-face, heart-to-heart encounter with him and his holy and sacrificial love.

About six hundred years ago an English monk whose name we do not know wrote this:

*Our intense need to understand will always be a powerful stumbling-block to our attempts to reach God in simple love . . . and must always be overcome. For if you do not overcome this need to understand, it will undermine your quest.
So I urge you, go after experience, rather than knowledge.
Knowledge tends to breed conceit, but love builds. Knowledge is full of labor, but love, full of rest. (The Cloud of Unknowing)*

Our Sequence Hymn says it, too: *I come with joy to meet my Lord!*

It is the face to face to encounter that is the purpose of our worship and at the heart of our Sacrament. Think of that when we come to the altar today.

Jesus was asking his closest followers to look at him and then look into themselves. He was asking them to look at him and understand that faith is not rooted in some carefully-constructed architecture of theology, but in a relationship – a relationship with Jesus the Christ, who walked the earth as one of us, teaching and demonstrating for us the dimensions of God's kingdom. It is a relationship we confirm when we recognize the Christ in each other and in the stranger at our gate. He asks only that we meet him face to face; and when we look at him he will look at us, and when he looks at us, even though it be our last conscious moment, we will be enfolded forever in his inexhaustible love.

